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AUTHOR Baker, Moira P.
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ABSTRACT

As teaching assistants, graduate students are often thrown into the deep waters of their first courses with little or no direction, instruction, or support. Teacher training programs offer little help in achieving a sense of professional teaching or classroom methodology. The Mentor program of Radford University's English Department provides an excellent approach to overcoming this void in the professional development of young teachers. Professors who participate in the program, moreover, not only give instruction and support but also receive a great deal themselves as they re-examine their own teaching practices and assumptions. Meetings with the department teaching assistants often occur over casual dinners during which participants share stories and insights concerning the profession of teaching. Each person has to finally write out his/her own teaching philosophy. The course descriptions and syllabi are designed together as a group. Overall, the regular meetings in the group and among colleagues in smaller gatherings prove enlightening, encouraging, and helpful for everyone, including the experienced professors. The program has reminded each participant, first and foremost, of the centrality of the student as the reason teachers teach. (HB)

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Moira P. Baker
Radford University
Radford, VA 24142

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Mentoring as Teaching and Learning

When I began teaching writing as a graduate TA, my colleagues and I were told to negotiate the tricky waters of our first freshman classes without benefit of paddles--or canoes, for that matter. Hell, we didn't even know how to swim. As for a life jacket: well, you can forget about that. During our first meeting with the program coordinator, we were given role books, parking stickers, and instructions on how not to dress.

"The texts from which you can choose are over there," the coordinator told us, pointing to a stack of colorful and slick-looking tomes about which none of us knew anything.

"Frederick Crews. Didn't he write a book on Hawthorne? Or was it Winny-the-Pooh? I guess I'll use that one," a colleague said.

That sounded like a good idea to me; besides, the cover used bold tones of red, magenta, and purple, a daring combination of colors, I thought; maybe it bodes well for what's between the covers. So I clutched Crews tightly, my weapon against the unknown. Each of us was assigned a "mentor," whose chore it was to visit our classrooms once a semester and write evaluations, letters that, in my case, said things like, "Though diminutive of stature, Miss Baker is able to command respect in her classroom through sheer force of her charm and wit." As a woman professional, I cringe to this day remembering that letter. Other than that, I had no relationship with this mentor--a blessing, to my thinking, under the circumstances.

In discussing our common plight, my colleagues and I discovered that none of us had ever really been taught to write. We just wrote. And most of us wrote

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pretty well, but none of us seemed to know how we wrote. Though successful writers, we were not self-reflective writers. In college we had been required to produce essays that met our professors' criteria for good writing; we had not been empowered as writers making conscious choices about the strategies we used to shape our words into effective acts of communication with an audience. Now, to our dismay, the same thing was happening to us as beginning teachers. We were being required to teach well, but we were not learning, step by step, the craft of teaching. We were not asked to formulate the principles that inform our teaching in view of available theories; nor were we asked to reflect on how we might develop teaching practices consonant with our own principles. In short, the program I experienced made no attempt to help us achieve a sense of our own empowerment as teachers, or an understanding of how both successful writers and teachers go about their work. Our program most assuredly was not designed to help us think in a "teacherly" way about our students and their cognitive development or about the ways in which our course design and teaching strategies should address their developmental needs as thinkers and writers. We all struggled at our craft as teachers, and somehow, higgeldy-piggeldy, some of us stumbled into what I like to call a "teacherly way of thinking" despite the program. Since that inauspicious beginning, I have been developing as a teacher of writing whose "specialization" is actually in literary studies and feminist theory, but whose teaching load is half freshman writing. Like any others here who are not composition/rhetoric specialists, I have had to pursue my own course of study in learning theory, various theories on the teaching of writing, and effective classroom practice. And I, like you, have had years of arduous trial-and-error during which I have improved my craft as a teacher--or, at least, I believe I have on my more sanguine days.

The Mentor/GTA program of Radford's English Department has been crucial to my continued development. I serve as a teacher in this program, a mentor for two or three graduate students with whom I work closely on every aspect of our teaching: from articulation of our individual teaching philosophies, to design of our quite different courses, to selection of our own texts, to shaping of our teaching practice, to developing effective relationships with our students. Yet I am equally a learner along with not only the GTAs on my team, but also all the other GTAs and mentors in the program. The program has enabled me to grow as a teacher/learner in many ways. It affords me the opportunity for continual self-reflection among other committed teachers and encourages me to reexamine my own practice in dialogue with two or three dedicated and enthusiastic colleagues who know me and my teaching. It provides the structure within which to read recent pedagogical theory and discuss its usefulness or limitations in our own practice. The mentor/GTA relationships I have experienced have supported me as I consider both successes and failures in developing classroom practices to meet my students' diverse needs. And, in a curious way, these relationships have encouraged me to try new things, take risks that I otherwise might not be inclined to do without this "safe space" in which I can reflect honestly with others upon what is happening in my classes. Finally, it vitalizes my teaching in all my other courses, making me much more conscious that there's a vast difference between "professing" and "teaching," between merely "requiring" products or performances of students and affording them learning opportunities that enable them to develop in both sequential and recursive ways the skills and knowledge for which we hold them accountable. The program has helped empower me as a self-reflective teacher, and my sense is that it does this for many of our GTAs as well. Our work together, it seems to me, constitutes an instance of what

Paulo Friere calls "liberating education," consisting of critical thinking in common rather than "transferrals of information." In such liberatory education, Friere states, "The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is ... taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. ... The students--no longer docile listeners--are now critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher."

Before beginning my first year as mentor, I found myself re-examining, from the ground up, my own teaching practice. I had to ask myself just why, for instance, do I use portfolio grading, why do I offer the kinds of writing invitations I do, why do I use peer writing groups, why do I ask students to write about their writing process, why do I ask them to write self-assessments and pre-conference reflections on their pieces? How is all that consonant with my teaching philosophy in general and my understanding of how to teach writing? On a deeper level, what <u>is</u> my teaching philosophy? What do I consider my role and responsibilities? What do I consider my students' roles and responsibilities?

By mid-summer, my head was awash in questions that I hadn't asked myself for years. It seemed to me that before I could be an effective mentor, I needed to become as self-reflective about my own practice and as articulate about my grounding principles as I could be since I would need to explain why I do what I do to beginning teachers. And I would also need to suggest other choices available to them, strategies or practices different from my own, but also possibly useful to them in their own practice. By mid-August, I was ready to go, charged up by the new clarity and confidence that such reflection brought. It's a wonderful feeling not only to know what you're about, but to <u>know</u> that you know what you're about.

My first meeting with the two first-year GTAs who are currently working with me was informal, relaxed, a seemingly spontaneous conversation over dinner we had barbecued together. "What's one of the most powerful memories you have about your own experiences of learning, either good or bad, either 'book learnin'' or something else," I asked over salad. We told stories over dinner, and then, along about dessert time, I wondered out loud what each of us thought constituted "good" teaching. "What can each of us hope for from ourself as a teacher," I queried. "What ideals or principles does each of us hope to strive for in the classroom?" "What does each of us think makes for good teaching and a nurturing learning environment in a writing classroom?" This was the beginning of a dialogue that has continued for two years now--a dialogue in which I have been able to share what I have learned from my own experiences of teaching, and learn from younger colleagues who are closer to the experience of students than I am. Eventually, we all wrote down our own teaching philosophy, our grounding principles, and the assumptions we hold about our students and ourselves as we design our courses. I wrote mine in the form of a story remembered from my experience as a second-grader. The GTAs I work with wrote theirs in the form of a personal letter to their students. We swapped drafts, responded to each other's pieces, and cribbed ideas that helped us clarify our own statements.

In the next two days, we worked together to design our course descriptions and syllabus. Again, I had to re-think why I ask students to do virtually everything that I ask them to do day-by-day; I had to get at the principles behind these practices so that I could explain conceptually to the GTAs what I would like to happen in a writing classroom. When I met with the GTAs we were able to find better ways to achieve some of our ends, and so designed the first 7 weeks of our course together. By the second 7 weeks, the GTAs wanted to design

their own units, and so I met with them individually to offer feedback and suggestions about options available to them to meet their objectives. The whole process, repeated each year, has helped develop what I call a "habit of self-reflection" that is becoming almost instinctive. It is reinforced through our bi-weekly team meetings during which we reflect together on our successes and failures and discuss together possible adjustments we might make in view of what is actually happening in our classes. The impulse toward questioning my practice ingrained through this continuing dialogue provides a safe-guard against the temptation to go on automatic pilot that becomes ever stronger at an institution like mine, where we teach a 4 course load and struggle mightily to keep alive in our scholarly lives. Meetings with the team have also encouraged me to try new things, take risks, give over control, and center my classes more on students and their writing. Having a relationship of mutual trust and respect with 2 or 3 teaching colleagues with whom I can hash out my ideas, hear theirs, borrow from them, explain new strategies I'd like to try, and get their opinions on them has given me greater confidence to seek needed change in my teaching. And having people whom I trust and who understand what I'm about as a professional makes it much easier to discuss failures--a part of teaching that can be an invaluable invitation to change. With the support of this team, such failures become opportunities for reflection and learning on my part. The intimacy and trust developed on the Mentor/GTA team provides a "safe space" in which we all can experiment, reflect, and grow as teachers.

The bi-weekly meetings with the larger group consisting of all mentors and GTAs have provided me opportunities to discuss current theories of teaching writing with dedicated professionals who are concerned about developing their own practice, something I would probably not find the time to do if I were not part

of this program. The GTAs have played a significant role in some of our meetings, offering demonstrations of activities designed to teach students such things as point of view or more effective use of sensory detail, and especially shouldering most of the responsibility for planning and facilitating our intensive week of training for new GTAs at the beginning of each year. I have gleaned more than a few insights from their work and incorporated them into my own practice.

One of the unexpected benefits for me as a mentor has been the "spill over" into all my other classes of the habit of self-reflection and the centering of instruction on students as active subjects in learning that seem almost instinctive now when I teach writing. Earlier in my teaching career, I used to think I taught the Renaissance, or Shakespeare, or Women's Literature, or Introduction to Graduate Studies. Now in all my courses, whether undergraduate or graduate, I realize that I teach students, and that to do so, I must take into account how their minds develop as they grapple with new ways to conceptualize the reading of literature and the writing of scholarship. The reading in learning theory, and the theory of teaching writing that we do for the whole group mentor/GTA meetings has made me much more aware of my students' minds, of how students learn. Teaching literature, or anything else, involves the same attention to developmental processes in our students' thinking and writing that is of paramount importance in the writing classroom. I've stopped professing and started teaching in all my classes; stopped merely requiring, and started offering activities designed to help students develop the, reading, thinking and writing skills that I would like them to bring to a piece of literature. Or at least I'm working at all this. If I wish students to conceptualize on a sophisticated level the reading of Shakespeare, for example, then I must design

a course that affords them many different kinds of opportunities to, first of all, engage with the texts personally, using collaborative talking and writing to do so. Then the course should encourage students to experience how other readers of Shakespeare work to situate his texts in their rich historical, cultural, and ideological contexts. Again, students can share their explorations with each other through small group discussions and writing. They can share both their frustrations with some difficult readings and their understanding so that together they create knowledge. Finally, the course should include activities that help us consider how each of us, in our own historical context can speak to the texts we read. The same strategies for collaborative learning using speaking, reading, and writing that characterize an effective writing class, as I have come to understand that in my work as a mentor, should provide students in this Shakespeare classroom opportunities for the kind of cognitive development needed for them to be successful at the requirements I ask. Working closely with the GTAs on my team, and with the other mentors and graduate students in our program, has helped me experience how both teacher and students can be subjects in the learning process, can be, as Freire says, "teacher/learners and learner/teachers." The program has helped me learn how do design writing classes in which this same student-teacher relationship prevails. And this learning has been something that I bring not only to the writing classroom, but to all my classes. It's something I simply cannot check at the door, no matter which class I enter.